YUKINORI YANAGI

DARKNESS ILLUMINATED

The installation artist's monumental, multipart artwork at a derelict industrial site raises questions about tradition and modernity in Japan.

BY JANET KOPLOS

IN THE '90s, Yukinori Yanagi and his intelligent and often witty sociopolitical artworks seemed to be everywhere. The Japanese artist's *World Flag Ant Farm* in the "Aperto" exhibition of the 1993 Venice Biennale earned him a young-artist prize. He did a project at Philadelphia's Fabric Workshop and had a solo show at New York's Queens Museum, as well as gallery solos in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris and Zurich. His neon version of Japan's wartime Rising Sun flag, pulsing and changing color and pattern, filled the Broadway window of the Guggenheim Museum's SoHo branch in 1994-95, when Alexandra Munroe's "Japanese Art Since 1945: Scream Against the Sky" was on view. But in the new century, Yanagi has been mostly out of sight in the West.

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In fact, he was engaged in an enormous undertaking, a single-concept, multipart work for a derelict industrial site, which took 10 years to develop and construct. Last April this *Inujima Art Project* opened to the public on the island of that name in Japan's Inland Sea. It is sponsored by the Benesse Corporation and its Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation, which already maintains public sculptures and "Art Houses," along with a museum and guest residences designed by Tadao Ando, on the island of Naoshima, a 45-minute boat ride away [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '02]. In 2004 the foundation opened a second museum on Naoshima, the extraordinary Chichu Museum—a below-ground venue that was built to house just eight artworks. The Chichu now manages a new structure for Yanagi's complex installations and videos on Inujima.

The site encompasses the remains of a 1909 copper refinery. The Japanese word for refinery, *seirensho*, is the subtitle of the overall project. In 2007, the refinery was named one of 33 "Heritage Constellations of Industrial Modernization" by the Japanese government, and a concern with history underlies the effort. Dark, high-iron-content bricks made of slag from the refining process remain in the surviving floors and partial walls of roofless rooms, which have been cleaned up and constitute what Yanagi calls the *Icarus Labyrinth*. Modern Japan has been devoted to development, and the preservation of the ruins is relatively unusual in itself.

Another aspect of interest is ecological. Architect Hiroshi Sambuichi, incorporating one of the four remaining smokestacks, created an exhibition space amid the ruins. The new structure emphasizes local materials—the refinery's brick and slag, along with Inujima granite quarried right behind the complex. In a first for the Japanese art world, the site is ecologically self-sustaining, with a water-treatment system to process sewage while supporting a grove of fruit trees, and an airflow system that cools the rooms and hallways by drawing outdoor air through the facility, with the smokestack acting as a flue. The environmental science faculty of nearby Okayama University helped with the details, including geothermal heating and solar power. Artist and architect worked cooperatively, but Yanagi preferred to adapt his ideas to Sambuichi's architecture, despite its not immediately art-welcoming spaces. The main part is bunkerlike, with two areas exposed to sun and one to wind at the shoreline site.

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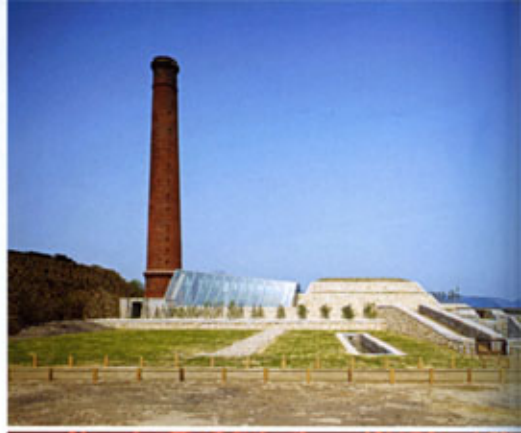
The experience of Yanagi's work begins inside the new semi-subterranean structure, with a video close-up of a blazing inferno, the sun. From there, a dark, brick-floored path leads toward a distant view of sky. But as you



ABOVE, A SECTION OF YANAGI'S *HERO DRY CELL*.

TOP, VIEW OF *SEIRENSHO*, A FORMER COPPER REFINERY, HOUSING YANAGI'S PROJECT ON INUJIMA ISLAND.

approach that "opening," you discover only a large angled mirror, and the path turns, revealing another dark passage with light at the end. The process repeats again and again. Only at the ninth mirror do you find the source: reflected illumination from a skylight. This is a direct, if eerie and slightly ominous, optical and spatial experience. But there is another layer, a reading more available to Japanese citizens or to Japanophiles than to the typical Western tourist. In Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion, the mirror, representing light and purity, is often the sacred object in the inaccessible dark interior of a shrine, and myth has it that the sun goddess once shut herself in a cave and was enticed out with a mirror (and bawdy dancing). A mirror is one of three elements of the emperor's regalia, too, so ancient ritual and modern politics are evoked by this piece, and—given the building's green apparatus—maybe solar power as well.

The heart of Yanagi's work is a sequence of spaces that incorporate architectural elements from a house that belonged to the novelist Yukio Mishima (1925-1970). Windows, doors, even a staircase, were preserved by Soichiro Fukutake, president of both the Benesse Corporation and the museum foundation sponsoring the Inujima project,